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What Religious Education Might Be

By

Durant Drake, Ph. D.

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WHAT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MIGHT BE

Religion, many of us believe, is the most important thing in life. And it is doubtful if there ever was a time when the Christian Church gave so great effort to fan and spread its flame as in these latter years. Yet interest in religion has been, on the whole, quite evidently on the wane; our generation has been drifting steadily away from professed Christianity. On this continent the situation has been complicated by the difficulty of getting hold of the immigrants, who have broken loose from old ties. A majority of them suffer a sea change when they leave the Old World, lose the faith of their fathers, and get no formulated religion to take its place. A typical result is that in New York City at present over half of the population of Protestant antecedents, over half of Catholic antecedents, and three quarters of the Jews, are "unchurched,"—have no institutional connection with religion. Besides this, great numbers of those who are nominally connected with some church actually stay away from it, or might as well for all the benefit that accrues to their religious life. In the country the tenacity of custom and the pressure of public opinion make the

statistics better. But many a rural church is no more than half alive. The situation everywhere is, for those who love religion, unquestionably serious.

For this decline of the churches there are several important reasons. One is the increasing richness of contemporary life, that has lured men away from concentration of thought and will upon spiritual things. Another is the spread of the scientific spirit, that makes men increasingly impatient with unproven dogmas and the pre-scientific beliefs set forth in familiar creeds. A cause less commonly noted is the irrelevance and comparative futility of most of our modern attempts at religious education.

A great deal of money is being spent, and the devoted energy of multitudes of workers is being used, in what is currently called religious education. But most of this effort is tangential to religion, does not hit the bull's-eye; it does not affect the will, does not produce religious zeal or an appreciably deepened spiritual life. The trouble lies partly in a failure to understand education, to utilize methods appropriate to the end that is sought. But it lies still oftener in a failure to understand religion, to realize clearly what is the end that should, above all else, be sought.

The pathos of the situation lies in the fact that the Church is too often giving stones to those who

hunger for bread. The hope of the situation lies in the equally undeniable fact that outside the churches there is to be seen a vital spirit of religion flaming in the souls of masses of men who have never enrolled under the banner of Christ and have no love for the Church. This truth, which is a matter of commonplace observation, has recently been given poignant expression in one of the noblest and most pathetic books which the war has produced, Donald Hankey's "A Student in Arms." Here was a young man, ardently Christian and deeply concerned for the spiritual life of his comrades, wrestling with the problem, until he cried out at last in exasperation, "How seldom does 'Christian Education' teach one anything worth knowing about Christianity!" Hankey was killed in action in October, 1916; and most of the men of whom he writes have paid, with him, the ultimate price,—leaving to us, who have been spared that sacrifice, a world to rebuild. Of all our tasks none is more important than that of making the age to come more deeply and pervasively Christian than the generation before the war.

A hundred writers are telling us to-day of the effects of the war upon religion and forecasting this result and that. Out of their confused and very diverse findings there emerges at least this one clear

truth: great reserves of heroism and sacrifice and loyalty have been called forth in millions of human hearts; and men who were living for petty and personal ends have come face to face with ultimate realities. The church had not tapped these resources.

While the war lasts the ardor of patriotism to a large extent acts as a substitute for religion, taking men out of themselves, giving them something noble and beautiful for which to live and labor and die. But this fever-heat cannot long outlast the war; there will be a slump to lower levels when the excitement is over and only the dreary tasks of reconstruction remain. Moreover, patriotism, for all its ability to exalt a commonplace life, to wring from it co-operative effort and self-transcendence, is a dangerous stimulant, easily degenerating into jingoism, chauvinism, pride of conquest, hatred of enemy-nations, unless it is illuminated and spiritualized by a vision that covets for the fatherland true excellence and not mere material aggrandizement. In short, whether national patriotism is to be a force predominantly for good or for ill depends upon whether men have come to care for the things that are just and pure and lovely and of good report, depends upon the success of their religious education.

Our most immediately pressing problems are, of

course, those of the war. But we must already be looking beyond. It is not enough to say that we shall have a new world after the war; we must *make* that new world. Of the weapons that lie to our hands, there are three whose potentialities must be more and more utilized,—legislation, art, and education.

Legislation has been extending its sphere with a rapidity that we could hardly have imagined three years ago; and this new willingness to submit our wilful individualities to social control, to subordinate ourselves to all sorts of organized efforts and common restraints, has undoubtedly come to stay. The older hit-or-miss, devil-take-the-hindmost individualism is vanishing forever,—and good riddance. But while legislation can banish alcohol, stop child-labor, and rein in profiteers, and in many another way bring us nearer the kingdom of God, there is one thing surely that it cannot do—it cannot make men religious.

Art is a power that we have hardly yet learned to harness. Here are floods of emotion going to waste over novels and short stories, at the theatre, at concerts, at the movies,—going to waste because they produce no appreciable changes in conduct. The emotional life that in the Middle Ages was largely concentrated on religion is now so constantly tapped by these secular stimuli that it is difficult to stir its

depths by the comparatively wan and tedious services of the church. Many of the most earnest men and women of to-day turn for inspiration to the dramatist, the poet, the essayist, rather than to the preacher. And with this we should have no quarrel if the inspiration caught from the artist were enough for the guiding and stabilizing of life. But these moments of quickened emotion, these vicarious heroisms and loves, pass quickly away and are forgotten, instead of being wrought into the substance of life. We need patient, week-by-week labor, directed by the vision of a clearly seen goal, to mould the spirits of plastic youth into a victorious and lasting idealism. The random and evanescent influences of art need to be utilized and supplemented by a deliberate process of education.

It is not abstractly necessary that the educator should be the church, or that the idealism with which we seek to stamp the souls of youth should be called Christianity. But actually our public schools are almost helpless in this matter; home education is too haphazard to be relied on, and no other institution has the resources and the will to carry on the work. Moreover, while this idealism of which I speak, this devotion of heart and will to noble effort and service, under any name would be as sweet, a concrete name of some sort, a common rallying cry,

is as necessary to it as a nation's name and flag is to the passion of patriotism. And surely there is none whose name our spiritual ideal may more properly bear than that of the Galilean prophet through whose teaching and death there has come to the modern world—at least, the world of the West—far the greater part of the spirituality which it has possessed.

Education, then, Christian education, to a degree not yet attempted, is our great need, if the new age is to increase, or even to retain, the spiritual heritage of the past. The era of evangelism may indeed any day reappear; perhaps we can never afford to do without the aid of cataclysmic conversions and periodic revivals. But we have learned that salvation comes normally through education; that must be our main reliance. Fortunately, in no field has there been more progress in the past decade.

Upon two points educators will agree: first, that the reason why education has accomplished no more than it has in the past is that we are as yet but tyros in the art; but secondly, that education, even such as we have given, has been of a potency which we hardly realize in moulding the minds of men. If you need an object lesson, see what the German ruling class have done to their people through education. When in 1871 Von Moltke entered Paris at the head

of the victorious German army, he said, "It is the Prussian schoolmasters who must be given the credit for this." And for a generation since they have been training their youth to militaristic ideals, to unquestioning loyalty to the state, to a pride and confidence in the destiny of the German nation,—with the result that we know. The potentialities of education are as great for good as for harm; in the use of this powerful instrument the church should not lag behind the Kaiser.

We are continually driven back, however, to the initial difficulty, that of winning church people to a clear conception of what education in religion *is*. When you hear it said of such-and-such a church that it has an excellent system of religious education, ask, What is it then that the youths are learning? Into what mould are their spirits being shaped? Our up-to-date churches have discarded the absurd catechisms of an older generation, and no longer foist upon their communicants the propositions of that stiff and humorless theology that was the spiritual milk of our fathers. But the so-called religious education of to-day consists chiefly of bits of the history (or pseudo-history) and literature of the Jews. Now the Jews of Bible times—or rather their great prophets and poets and chroniclers—were of a singularly religious temper, so that to those who read deeply

in the Bible and with understanding there are bound to come visions of profound and precious spiritual truths. The Bible is the great source-book for the study of the Hebraic spirit—as the Iliad and Odyssey are the source-books for the old heroic spirit of Greece. But source-books are not always the best tools of teaching; and I raise the question whether the Old Testament legends and chronicles, or even the Gospel incidents and the missionary journeys of Paul are the directest and most vital means of awakening or reinforcing the religious life of youth.

For one thing, the interest of the pupil in a Bible-class is primarily attracted, if attracted at all, to the historical episode; and when the moral is drawn it is apt, while accepted without question, to awaken little response. In the second place, those Jews were, after all, a provincial and undeveloped people; and their situations and problems, while really, of course, eternal in many of their aspects, are apt to seem remote and irrelevant to the youth of to-day. Most boys and girls are interested in contemporary problems, in live issues, in the question how they ought to act under such and such circumstances. And to try to awaken their interest in the religion of to-day through a study of the Psalms and sermons and anecdotes of the Jews of two thousand years ago is a curious pedagogical inversion. Of course it is

clear why Bible teaching is universally accepted as the natural and almost the only form of religious education; it is an inheritance from the days when the Bible was looked to as the unquestioned authority in morals. But to-day the burden of proof should be seen to rest upon those who insist that Christian education must be carried on exclusively or even primarily through the Bible. Most boys and girls go to Sunday school and to church reluctantly, because their parents wish them to; or, if gladly, for the social aspect of it, for the music, for something to do on Sunday, for any reason than that the best that is in them is there stirred into quickened life.

Take the ordinary Sunday-school class, studying, say, the story of Esther, or Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, or Peter's miraculous escape from prison; observe these boys and girls again listening to the ordinary sermon that hinges upon the exegesis of some Bible text. Then watch them at a meeting of their Boy Scouts or Camp Fire Girls, pledging their loyalty, consciously dedicating themselves to their simple but strict code of honor. Look upon this picture and upon that and tell me which method is more vital in forming the character of youth.

Whether we shall call such education Christian education comes down, of course, to a question of what Christianity *is*. If it is, as I hold, essentially a

Way of Life, then for the love of your children, for the hope of the future of the world, get down to business; teach the children that Way of Life. Make it simple, make it clear, make it direct, apply it to their actual problems of to-day and to-morrow. Let every boy know as clearly what he must do differently if he enrolls himself a Christian as he knows what he must do if he enrolls himself a Scout. If he is a normal boy and is approached in the right way he will *love* to enlist in the Christian army, he will have a real sense of what it means to sing "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war" — to war with unkindness, and impurity, and laziness, and sulking, and ill-temper, and the other enemies which he well knows and to which he can be made heartily ashamed to yield.

This means rescuing the boy's religion from mere church associations and making it an integral aspect of his daily life. Religion for many men and women, as well as for children, is a sort of intermittent dream, something that wells up in us under the peculiar spell of organ music and pulpit elocution —and disappears in the cold light of Monday morning. Especially to the healthy boy it appeals as rather goody-goody — if not as sheer discomfort. But let the boy realize that life itself is an art, and an art in which skill is learned by precious few, he

is at once naturally ambitious to learn it. To skate well, to swim, to play baseball, he will give endless exertion; to succeed in life itself will more and more, as he grows older, awaken his interest. It is, first of all, a question of showing him what real success is,—the sort of success that gives life lasting joy and power and the love of his comrades. Then he must be shown that it is not enough to *wish* to be good, or brave, or kind; he must learn *how* to be all this. Never quote to him that absurd Victorian counsel, "Be good, dear child, and let who will be clever." Show him that it *takes* cleverness, skill, experience, insight to *be* good. Goodness is an art to be studied all our lives, an art in which we shall at best none too well succeed — and in which we shall very likely not even *try* to succeed unless the church, or a right-minded parent, or some other source of inspiration, awakens our zeal to succeed.

Happily, the church is reawakening to the real purpose of its existence, turning back from the discussions of orthodox belief to the practical interests of apostolic times, trying to help people to solve their daily problems of conduct and to serve their neighbors. The last aspect of our church life to feel this wave of practicality is our religious education. Theological students still spend their precious years largely in studying ancient languages, and in

listening to the ideas of Greek and Hebrew scholars about the exact date of composition or the accurate translation and exegesis of old Jewish laws and legends and of the hasty letters which an early Christian missionary wrote to his infant churches, instead of grappling by day and by night to understand the extremely complex moral problems of today and the needs and temptations and views of life of the men and women whose steps they are to presume to guide.

The church exists to show men what is their real good, to point out to them how to avoid making a mess of their lives, to inculcate in them the spirit of service, and to teach them in patient detail how wisely to serve. This is not a mere matter of enlightenment, it is largely a matter of *training the will* — a thing that we have hardly begun to do. How is a boy, when he meets his first great unexpected, half-understood sex-temptation, to resist? There is a problem for you! Religion is a matter of just such big, daily, real problems. We speak of applied Christianity, — all Christianity worth the name is applied Christianity,—great eternal spiritual principles applied to the difficult business of living.

Certainly it is a valuable thing that our boys and girls should be taught an accurate historical account of the origins of our religion. I leave aside an

aspect of the matter on which I am tempted to descant, namely, that the account given of these origins, and especially of the life and character of Jesus, by most Christian churches is naïvely unhistorical. This embroidery of miracles, this acceptance at their face value of the biassed and naïve chronicles of the Jewish and Christian writers is one of the baneful aspects of modern Bible teaching. But a real comprehension of the great spiritual hero whose name we bear, it is the duty of the Church to try to give; and in some measure an acquaintance with the prophets that went before, and the apostles that followed after.

Furthermore, religious teachers will continue to draw from the Bible, and from other ancient writings, illustrations and parables and texts for the duties they present to their pupils. And here we run against another great danger, upon which I am tempted to dwell, the danger of a literal acceptance of the mythology of the Bible. How far religion must be mythological to be moving, how far the religious life needs to be dramatized, as it is in the New Testament picture of the Judgment Day, or in the anthropomorphic God of the Old Testament, in order to grip the hearts of men, is a psychological question, the discussion of which would take us afar. Bernard Shaw, in one of his most important

though least known essays, "The Illusions of Socialism," shows how that great human movement has expressed itself in the language of the struggle of an innocent oppressed class against a ruthless tyrannical capitalistic class—a struggle which will some day, by an overturn as abrupt and dramatic as that of the Dies Iræ of Catholic dogma, bring the meek and worthy laborers into their inheritance and inaugurate a socialistic kingdom of God on earth. The intent and the essential insight of socialism Shaw heartily approves; this vivid chiaroscuro of oppressed and oppressors, this hope of an abrupt and complete transformation, he agrees is utterly mythical. And yet he holds that it is only through the mythology that the truth and the ideal of socialism maintains its hold upon the masses of its adherents. Similarly it may be argued that Christianity needs the literal acceptance of its mythology, and that openly to rationalize it would be to deal it its death blow.

I am not so pessimistic. I believe that we misread human nature, to deem that religion needs a cloak of illusion to appeal to the hearts of men—even to the heart of childhood. The problem of how and when to disentangle the truth from the poetry in the myth and parable in the Bible is one which I must not here pause to discuss. I merely

allude to it to point out a danger that goes with Bible education. My main point is rather that Bible education at best is *but a means to religious education, not religious education itself;* and the end is often forgotten in attention to the means.

There are many other dangerous currents in the teaching of the Church. There is the shallow optimism that says, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world," instead of saying, "God is in our hearts, to *make* all right with the world." There is the comfortable preaching of the supernatural coming of the kingdom of God, if we will be patient and wait for it, instead of the divinely *un*-comfortable preaching of the need of our getting out and *helping* the kingdom of God to come. There is the spirit of bragging about our religion as the perfect religion and the patronizing attitude toward the so-called heathen religions, in place of the humble eagerness to look for inspiration and ideas to other religions, and the resolve to make our religion the best in the world by incorporating all that is helpful and uplifting in them all. There is the concern with merely individual salvation, which ignores the truth that we live a corporate life, and that the unrighteousness of our social order cannot be rectified by the saving of the souls of some of its members. There is the stupid sectarianism that

insists upon the importance of utterly trivial beliefs, which, even if true, have little to do with the salvation of the individual or of society. These distortions of the true Christian spirit, and many others, one might linger upon, for they poison and inhibit the teaching of that spirit to our youth. But I must return to emphasize what is of positive importance.

Christianity, we say, is a way to live. More concretely, it is the way of love and loyalty, the way that believes in lending a hand, in the square deal. Nineteen hundred years ago it meant stopping by the roadside to save a man who had fallen among thieves. To-day it means working and economizing to send aid to the Belgians; it may mean for you, if you are a man in the third decade of your life, enlisting to cross the seas and *bring* aid to the Belgians. The word "love" sounds sentimental; the thing the word means is the strongest and bravest thing in the world and can be made to appeal enormously to our boys and girls.

Purity is a harder aspect of Christianity for youth to learn to love. But again, Christian purity is not an anæmic, negative thing; it is a great, glorious passion—the passion symbolized immortally by the cross. Purity is a simple thing; but, like many another simple thing, like keeping your temper, like loving unlovable people, it is hard. It is the

hardest of all things for the young; and because it is, it is the supreme challenge to them, to which, if you can touch the right cord, they will respond as to a bugle call.

"God," "the kingdom of God,"—the child will not clearly understand the meaning of these terms, but they can mean much to him. And they can mean more and more to us as we grow older, until the time comes, as it ought to come to us all, and would to most of us if we had a real religious education, when they are the supreme words in our life—when to serve God with body and mind and soul, and to work for the bringing in of the kingdom of God, is our one aim in life, and our dearest joy.

Can religious education do this for common men? I believe it can. I *know* it can; for it has done *just* this in happier periods of the world's history. The early Christians went about pure and loyal, with God in their hearts, and hands outstretched to help their neighbors. They offered religious education to all they met, because religion was so infinitely precious to them. We have long ceased to talk much about it during the week; it is an old story, and we have many other interests. So we have nearly forgotten what it is. We think it is necessary to invest these simple truths with all sorts of wrappings of theology and to laboriously extract them from stories of long ago.

H. G. Wells, in his Modern Utopia, elaborates a conception which has appealed to many of his readers—that of the *Samurai*, a sort of voluntary nobility, men and women who live according to a Rule—not a harsh Rule, but one that demands effort and unselfish service. Such a voluntary nobility is the band of Christians who seek to keep to the Rule given them by Christ. If we would concentrate our efforts seriously on training our boys and girls to loyalty to that code, using all the lessons that applied psychology and child-study are teaching us, we could so stamp it into their natures that, though they might lapse from it, the great majority would return to it and know themselves, in spite of the lure of senses and self, to be inescapably Christian in ultimate intent.

This process has three aspects, which, though more or less blended in practice, need separate attention, that none be unduly neglected.

First, there must be *enlightenment.* The preacher and the Sunday-school teachers must see to it that every regular attendant receives a clear and comprehensive notion of what the Christian ideals are, why they are important, and how they should be applied to the concrete personal and public moral problems of our daily life. Free discussion should be encouraged of the questions how a Christian should act under such or such circumstances. The blindness of well-meaning people to the evil consequences of

some of their acts should be patiently but insistently pointed out, and examples of Christian living studied, that insight into the pitfalls and opportunities of life may grow more penetrating and profound. Books on spiritual living and on practical homely ethical problems should be available in the church library, and the minister should be adviser to his flock in matters of difficult decision which they may bring to him.

Secondly, there must be *commitment.* The Christian way of life must be definitely accepted by each member of the church as *his* way. A profession of intent to live by the Christian code should be required of every one who seeks to join the church —in place of the profession of belief (in matters about which the member can seldom have a well-founded judgment) so often required to-day. This pledge, in abbreviated form, might well be repeated at every church and Sunday-school service, as the Apostles' Creed (so-called) is now repeated in many churches. The members must never lose sight of the fact that what unites them is their common desire and their mutual pledge to follow, so far as in them lies, the path blazed by the Founder of their Church—the way of sacrifice and service. The consciousness of their final commitment to this way must be vivid enough to stay with them during the

cares and distractions and temptations of the week.

Thirdly, there must be *reinforcement.* It is not enough to have seen what is right to do, and to have willed to do it. Our vision clouds and our wills falter. Every available stimulus must be utilized to keep the flame burning. The sermon should be a challenge to wandering thoughts, a call to wavering wills. The prayers and the hymns, the lesson read, the lives of heroes studied in the Sunday school, should all have practical value in rousing emotion and directing it into channels of conduct.

In a word, religious education consists of the training of the will to keep to a code—that code which in spite of our sectarian differences we agree to be the way Christ taught men to live. If Christianity be essentially the devotion of heart and will to a great ideal of life, and if that ideal with its profound reflection of the deepest needs of human nature, and its instant appeal to the best in us, be drilled into us in concrete detail from childhood up, is there not a hope that Christendom may really be Christianized? And in this Christianizing process, shall we not, all of us, of whatever sect or creed, be drawing nearer and nearer together into a unity of purpose which may eventually weld all Christians into one universal Church of God?

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